CHAPTER XXXIV.

CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE REPUBLICS COMPOSING IT; A SKETCH OF THEIR HISTORY; AREA AND POPULATION.—SNAKES, LIZARDS, AND OTHER CREEPING THINGS.—COSTA RICA AND ITS REVOLUTIONS.—A PRESIDENT WHO COULDN'T READ.—HONDURAS AND ITS RESOURCES.—VISIT TO TEGUCIGALPA.—YUSCARAN AND ITS MINERAL WEALTH.—UNFORTUNATE FINANCIERING.—INTERESTING SOCIAL CUSTOMS.—INTEROCEANIC CANALS; THEIR PRESENT STATUS.—THE NICARAGUA CANAL; SURVEYS, ESTIMATES, AND DESCRIPTION OF THE ROUTE; PROBABLE ADVANTAGES TO THE WORLD'S COMMERCE; TERMS OF THE CONCESSION; ESTIMATED COST, REVENUES, AND SAVING OF DISTANCES.—FAREWELL TO MEXICO.—THE END.

AFTER completing their description of the ruined cities of Yucatan, Frank and Fred looked around for something new to occupy their attention. They were not long in finding it.

"I wish we could extend our journey to Central America," said Fred.



IN A CENTRAL AMERICAN FOREST.

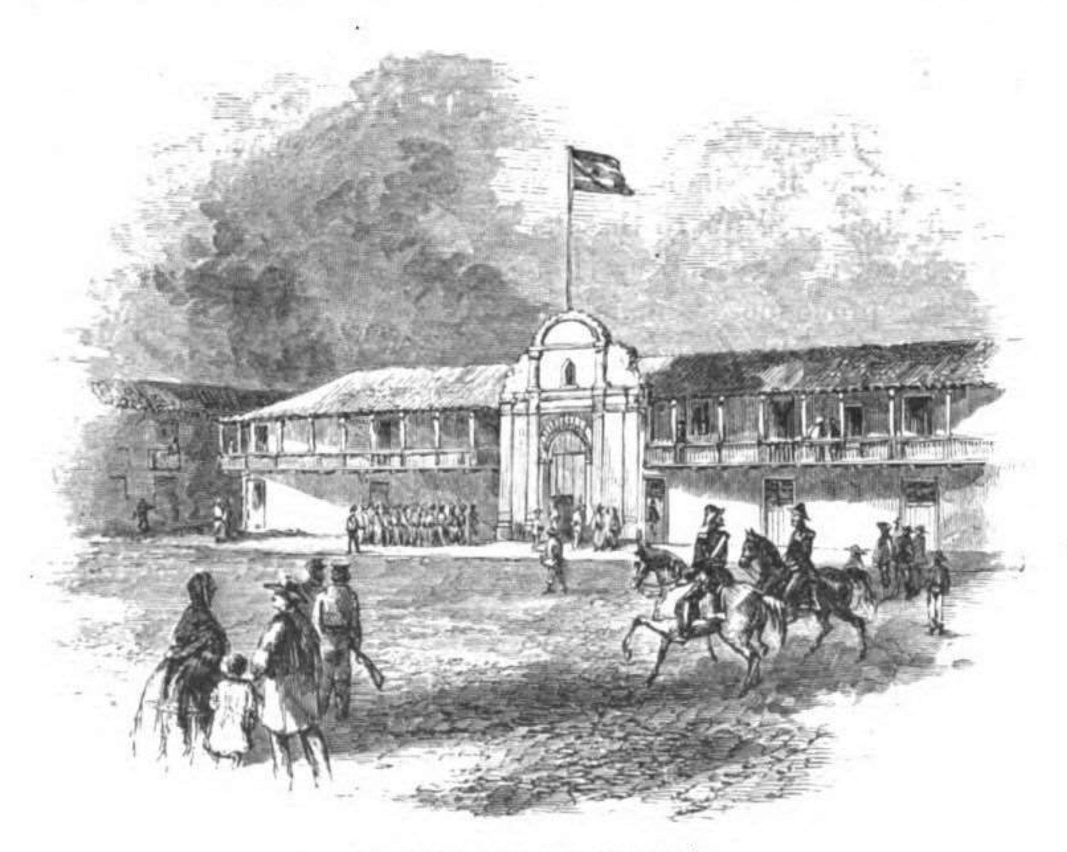
"So do I," answered his cousin, "but I'm afraid Doctor Bronson would not consent. His plans do not include a journey farther south than Yucatan, and besides, I don't think he would relish the idea of

making a trip through a region where the comforts of travel are as limited as they are between here and Panama."

They sounded the Doctor on the subject, but did not receive any encouragement. His arrangements were such that he was to be in New York by a date that would make it impossible to accomplish the proposed journey.

The youths cheerfully assented to the situation, and consoled themselves by collecting a fair stock of information about Central America and entering it in their note-books; Frank said this was the next best thing to seeing the country for themselves.

"Central America," wrote Frank, "is about 900 miles long, and varies from 30 to 300 miles in width. It extends south about eleven degrees from the eighteenth parallel of north latitude, and is therefore entirely in



GOVERNMENT PALACE, SAN JOSÉ.

the tropics. The geographers give it an area of 175,000 square miles, and a population of something less than three millions, the greater portion being native-born Indians. The whites and creoles are nearly all of Spanish descent, as the country was conquered and occupied by the Spaniards soon after the Conquest of Mexico."

Fred suggested that a census of the snakes, lizards, birds, and beasts of Central America would give a large population, as it was known to abound in those things to a very liberal extent. He declared in advance that he would not accept the office of animal census-taker, as he had understood that the serpents were numerous and dangerous, as is the case in tropical countries generally.

"I was reading this morning," said he, "of a snake of the constrictor species that was killed close to a hacienda where the writer of the narrative was stopping. It was fourteen feet long, and not unusually large of its kind. The people of the hacienda said it was fortunate that the creature had been despatched, as it would quite likely have killed one of the children; and they related many stories about babies being swallowed by these serpents.

"The same traveller, Mr. Wells, tells about a ceremony that he witnessed where a tamagasa, one of the most deadly snakes of Central America, was burned alive in the public square of a village. Two natives had found the snake basking in the sun; one threw his poncho over the reptile while the other held its head to the ground with a forked stick till its mouth could be sewed up, so that it could do no harm. The snake was about three feet long. The ceremony took place in the evening, and the village priest pronounced a malediction upon the creature before it was consigned to the flames. No remedy is known for the bite of this serpent, nor for that of the taboba, another venomous product of Central America."

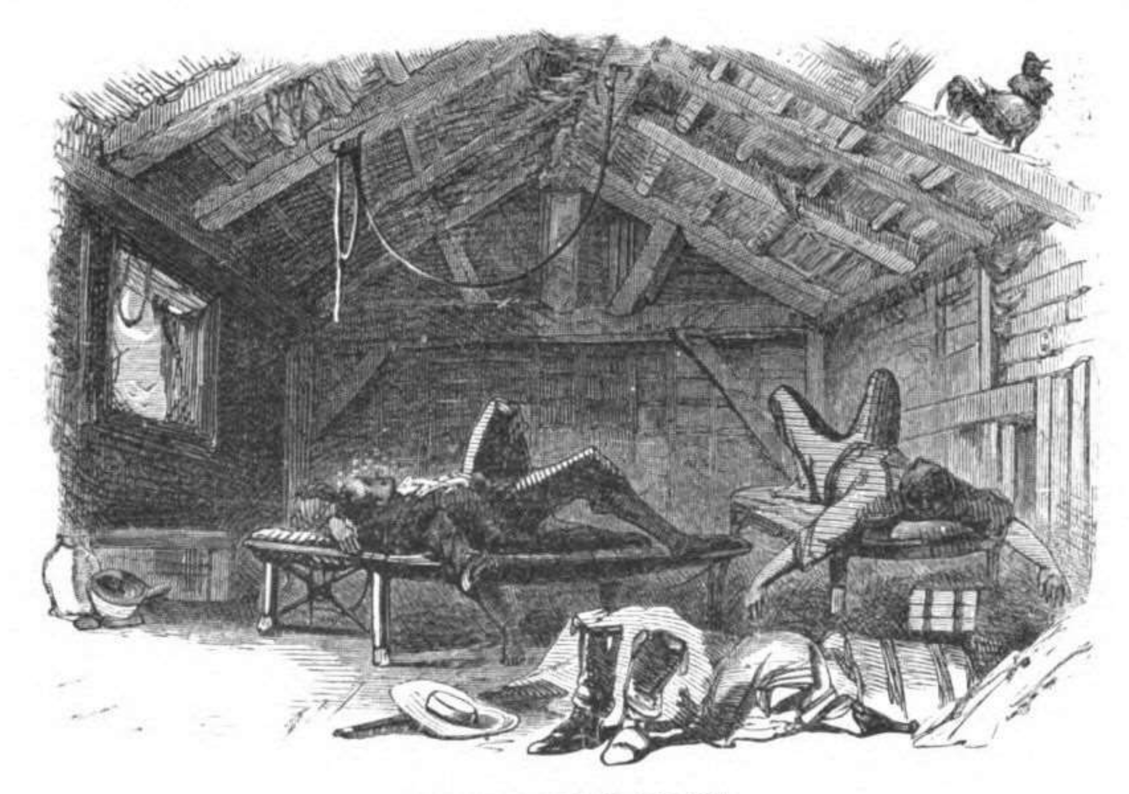
"To go on with the country," said Frank, when Fred paused at the end of his snake story, "we will remark that Central America comprises five republics which are independent of each other, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, San Salvador, and Nicaragua. Down to 1823 they were colonies of Spain; in that year they formed themselves into a federal republic of States and declared their independence. They continued thus until 1839, when they dissolved their federation and became independent of each other. Since then they have united again on two or three occasions, but have not remained so for any length of time. Several attempts at a federation (one of them in 1888), have resulted in nothing. Now and then the republics have wars among themselves, but the rest of the world goes on as if nothing had happened, as the moon did when the dog barked at it.

"The governments of the States of Central America are republican in form, modified by revolution and assassination; happily these modifications are not applied as frequently nowadays as in former times, but they

are by no means unknown. To show how revolutions are started and how they sometimes turn out, let us take a page from the history of Costa Rica."

Thereupon Frank read from "The Capitals of Spanish America" the account of how the Government of that republic was overthrown, and a new one established in 1871. Substantially it was as follows:

The Congress of Costa Rica had caused a railway to be surveyed from ocean to ocean across the State. It was necessary to seek foreign aid for



CENTRAL AMERICAN LODGINGS.

the construction of the line, and the two banking houses at San José, the capital city, were rivals for the appointment of Government agent to negotiate the loan.

The defeated banker was, like his rival, an Englishman (married to a Costa Rican lady), and the capital of his bank was English. In revenge, and with a view to business, he determined to overthrow the Government and set up one of his own.

To this end he negotiated with a cowboy named Thomas Guardia, who had made a reputation as commander of a small force of cavalry in a war with Nicaragua, to head a revolution, under promise of money and position. The army of the republic comprised about 250 men, and they were



BANANA PLANTATION IN COSTA RICA.

easily overcome by Guardia, who assembled half that number of cowboys and rode suddenly into San José one morning, capturing the whole place by surprise. It was one of the "revolutions before breakfast," to which Central America is accustomed.

Guardia imprisoned all the Government officials who did not run away, and appointed himself Dictator. Among the fugitives was the constitutional President, and therefore it was necessary to hold an election for a new President, Guardia being made provisional President until the election could be held. The English banker, who had started the revolution, named his father-in-law as the candidate for President, and it was expected that he would be elected without opposition.

Guardia concluded, from his experience as Dictator, that it was not a bad thing to be President, and when the election came off he ordered his officers to secure the position for him, and leave the banker's father-in-law out in the cold. He was unanimously elected; 2000 votes were cast in a population of 200,000, and Guardia received them all.

He was unable to read or write when he became President, but he was a man of decided ability, called wise counsellors to aid him, did everything he could for the advancement of his country, and altogether made an excellent ruler for the little republic.

The present President of Costa Rica is Don Bernardo de Soto, who was a favorite of Guardia, and is a man of good education. He graduated



DON BERNARDO DE SOTO, PRESIDENT OF COSTA RICA.

at the college in San José, and completed his studies in Europe; and since his elevation to the high office he has shown ability and intelligence in the management of public affairs.

During their investigation of Central America the youths met Mr. Wilson, of New York, an old friend of Doctor Bronson's, who had just

returned from a visit to Honduras. He readily replied to all the questions that were propounded by Frank and Fred, and his answers may be summed up as follows:

"I found Honduras very interesting," said Mr. Wilson, "and was sorry that I could not remain longer. The country seems to have great promise,

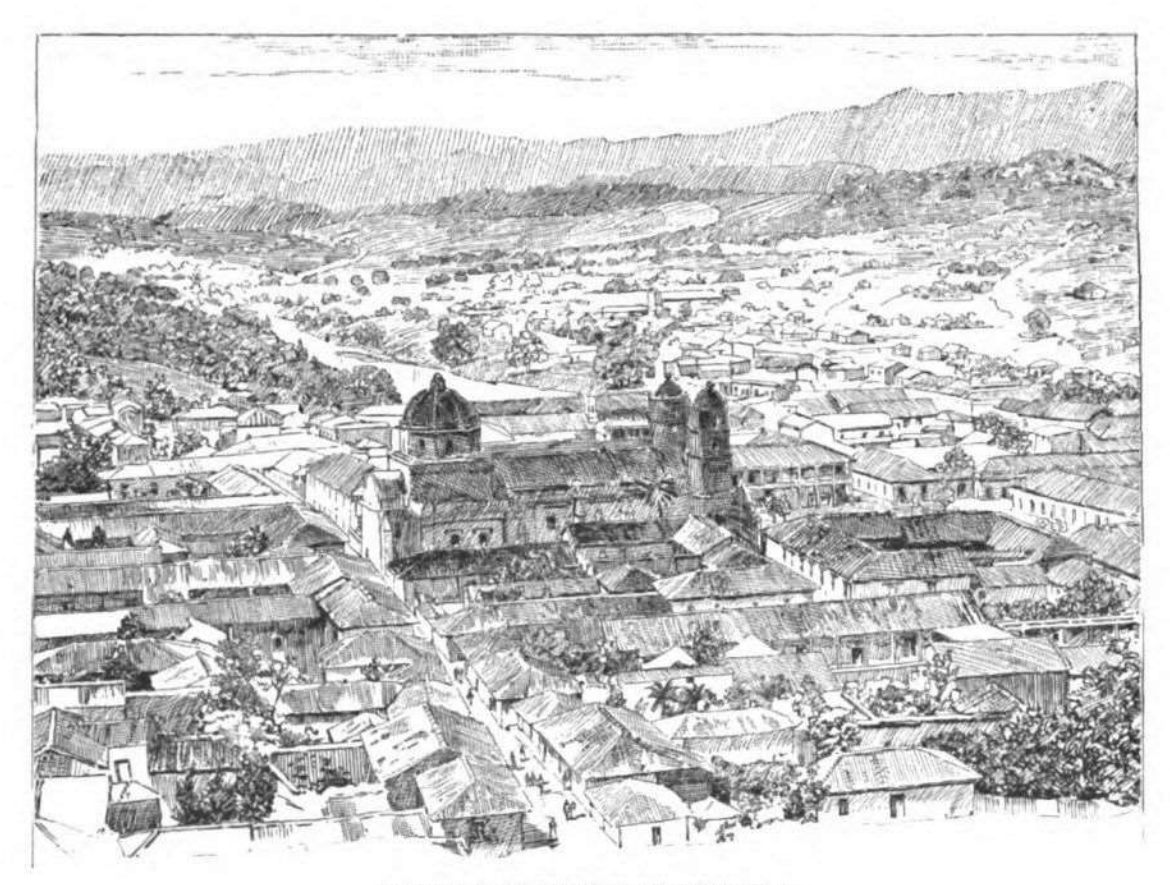


GEN. LUIS BOGRAN, PRESIDENT OF HONDURAS.

as it is exceedingly fertile, and the mountain regions contain great quantities of gold and silver. All tropical fruits grow there in abundance, and there might be a large product of coffee and sugar. At present the exports consist chiefly of cattle, mahogany, hides, and rubber, of a total value of about two millions of dollars annually, and the imports are nearly as much. The expenses of conducting the government are not far from one million dollars a year, sometimes exceeding the revenue, and sometimes falling below it.

"Honduras has been unfortunate financially," continued the gentle-

man, "as it contracted a loan in England for building a railway across the country from ocean to ocean, and the greater part of the money went into private hands and not in the most honest way imaginable. Twenty-seven million dollars' worth of bonds were negotiated in London, under the guarantee of the Government, and all that the country has to show for this large amount of money is about sixty miles of poorly built railway.

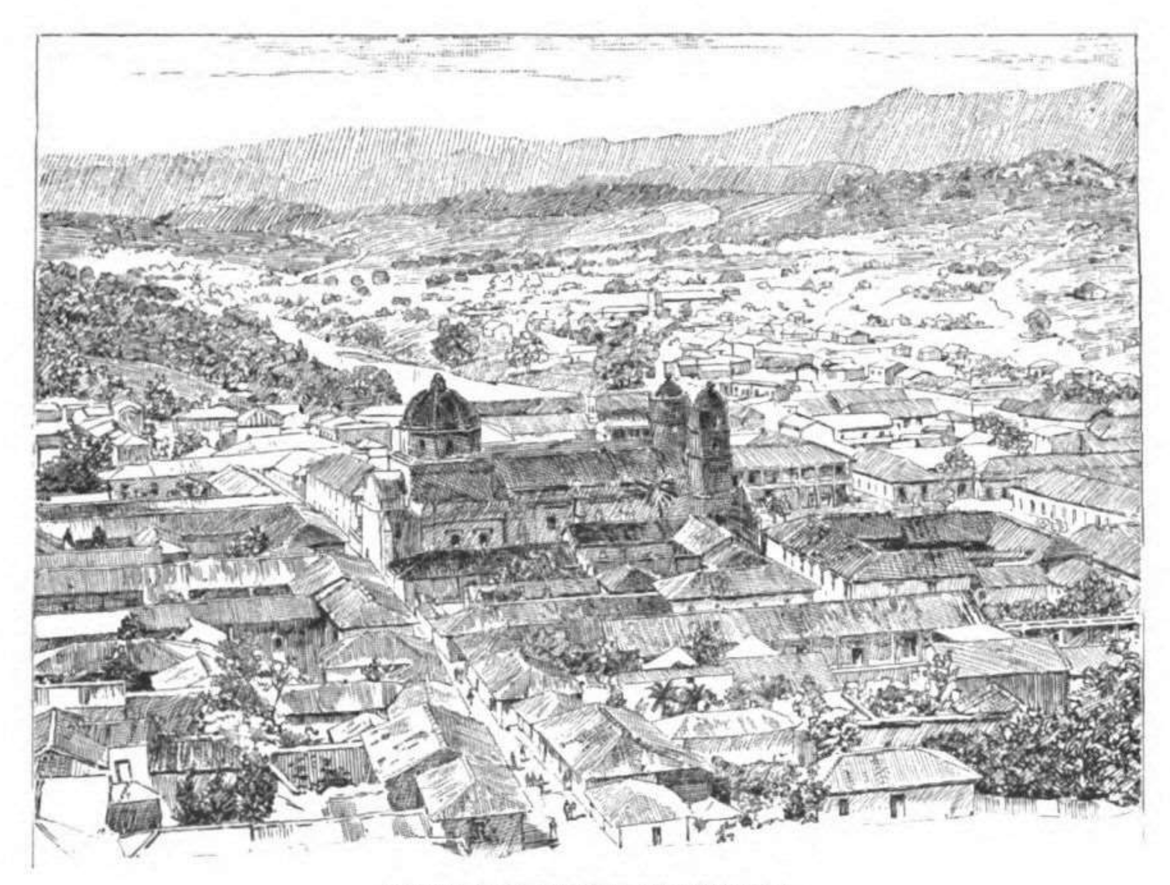


TEGUCIGALPA, CAPITAL OF HONDURAS.

Since 1872 the interest on this loan has not been paid, and probably it never will be; in the negotiations the Government and the purchasers of the bonds were deceived, and the country never obtained more than a small fraction of the benefit that was promised.

"Negotiations are now going on for wiping out the debt by issuing new bonds for a part of it, and creating a new loan by which the Inter-oceanic Railway can be completed and other railways constructed. The President of Honduras, General Bogran, is a man of great enterprise, and has done much for the country since he took possession of his office. His predecessor had built a fine boulevard from the capital part way to the Pacific coast, but from that point there was only a mule-track, the same that

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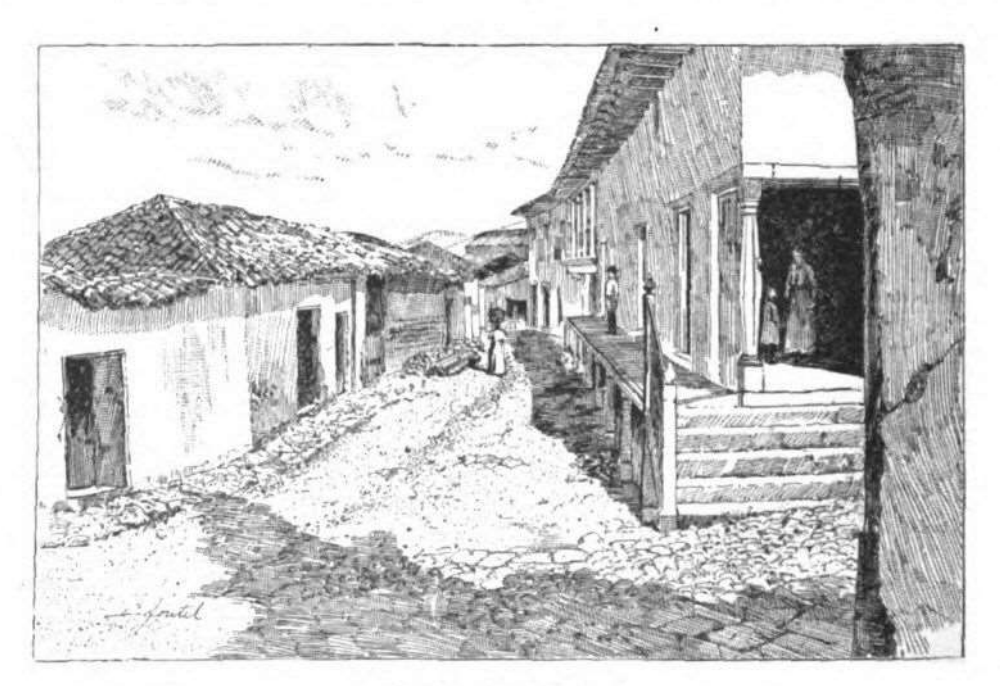
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had been there for three hundred years. General Bogran made a contract with some American engineers to build a wagon-road from the coast to the end of this boulevard, and another from the capital, Tegucigalpa, to Yuscaran, the centre of the principal mining district."

"Please tell us about the mines of Honduras," said Frank, as Mr. Wilson paused for a moment.

"Certainly, I'll do so with great pleasure," was the reply. "Honduras was the first part of the main-land of North America visited by Columbus and his companions, and as soon as Cortez had completed the conquest of Mexico and established himself firmly on its soil he proceeded to the subjugation of Honduras. From the time of the Conquest down to 1820 the mines of Honduras yielded enormously of gold and silver; the Government took as its share twenty per cent. of the gross product, and whenever a district proved to be unusually rich the King acknowledged the



STREET IN YUSCARAN.

good-fortune by 'decorating' the place. This was a much more economical proceeding than reducing the taxes or granting a sum in money for public improvements.

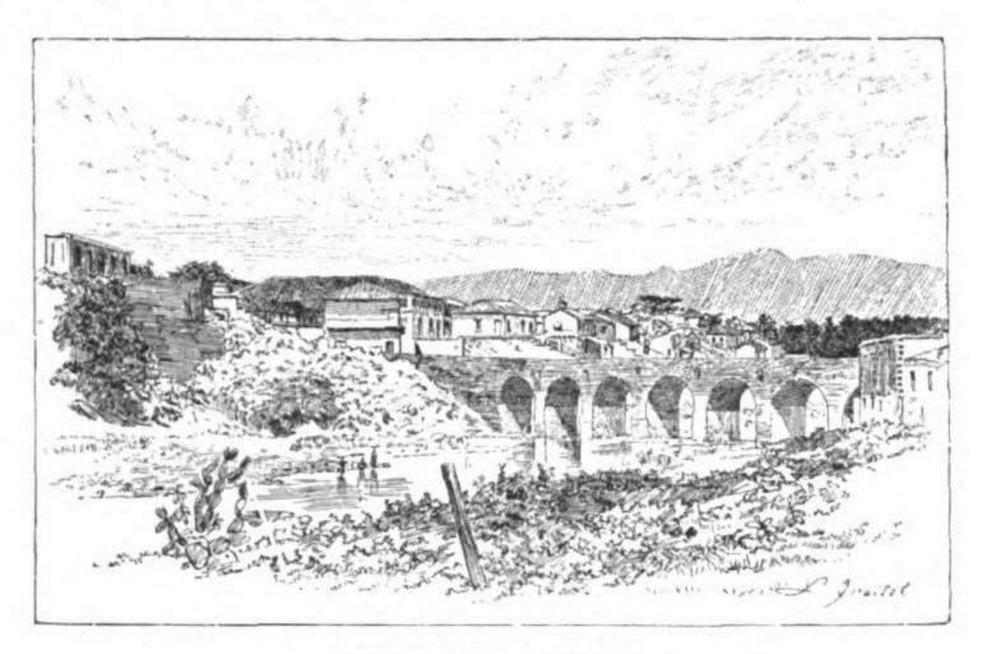
"Perhaps you don't understand me," said Mr. Wilson, as he observed a puzzled expression on the faces of the youths. "When I was at Tegucigalpa I examined some old documents in the Government library, and came upon one containing the following paragraph:

"'The flourishing state of the mining interests and the large returns



they brought the Crown influenced the King, so that on the 17th day of July, 1768, there was given to the *pueblos* (villages) of San Miguel, Tegucigalpa, and Heredia the honorable title of *villas* (cities).'

"A decree of that sort is exactly like conferring a decoration on an individual," continued the gentleman. "It costs nothing to the giver, and makes the recipient proud of his distinction, at least that is supposed to be the purpose of a decoration.

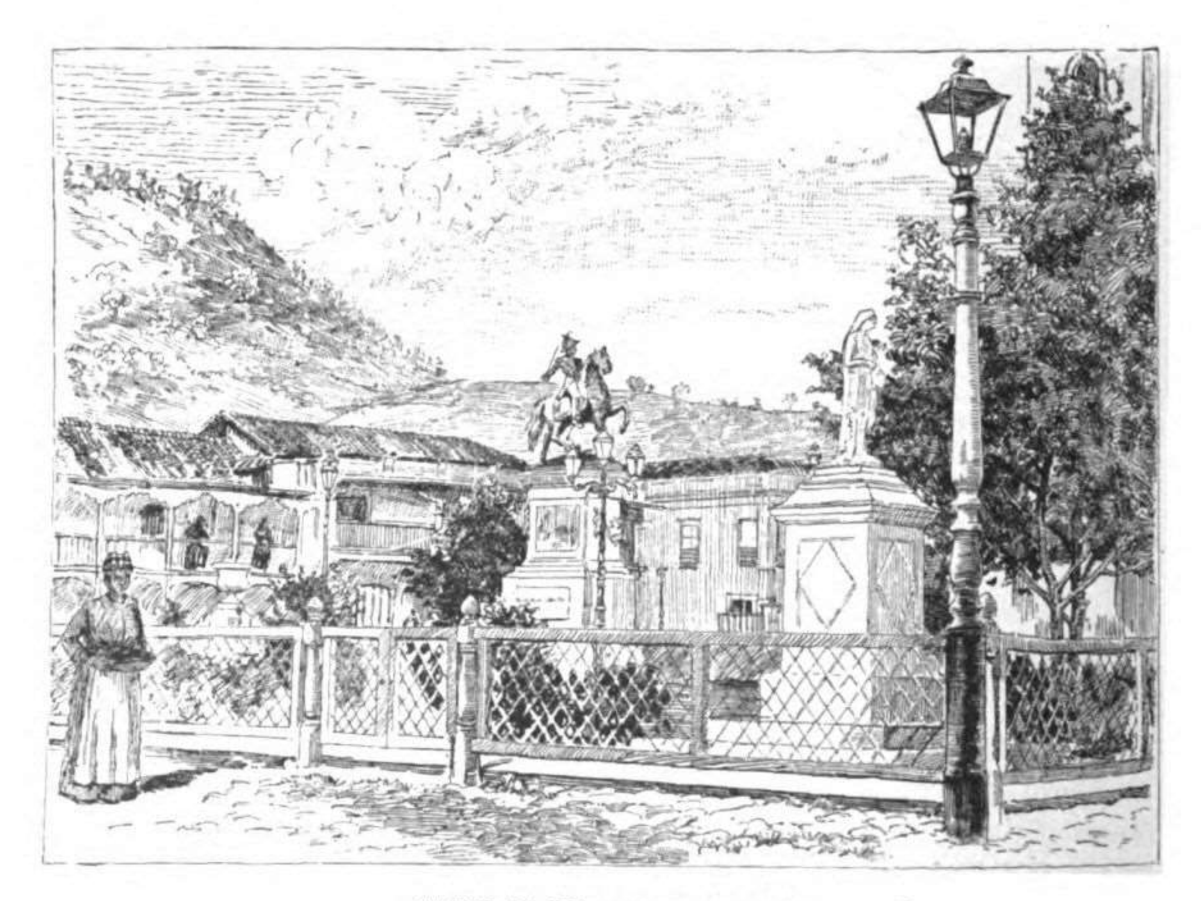


OLD BRIDGE AT TEGUCIGALPA.

"To show you how rich were the mines of Honduras, let me instance the Guayabilla mine in the Yuscaran district. It is about fifty miles east of Tegucigalpa, and near the line of Nicaragua, at an elevation of 3250 feet above the sea-level. In the old days the ore was so rich that the owners of the mine did not reduce any that yielded less than sixty dollars per ton, and after the mine was deserted $60,000 was obtained from it by a gentleman who now lives in the country. From 1812 to 1817 the King's fifths from this mine amounted to $400,000, so that in five years the product of the mine was $2,000,000. In 1837 the mine had been worked to a depth of 300 feet, when the miners were impeded by water. Accordingly they prepared to abandon the mine, and did so by removing the pillars for the sake of the ore they contained. Of course the mine caved in soon after the pillars were removed, and the same was the case with other mines that were similarly maltreated."

Fred asked Mr. Wilson how many productive mines there were in Honduras during the time of its occupation by the Spaniards.

"As to that I cannot say exactly," was the reply, "but at a rough calculation there were not fewer than fifty in the Yuscaran district that were once active and paid royalties to the King. In the Choluteca and Tegucigalpa districts there were fully 100 mines, so that we may safely count 150 in all. Under the enlightened policy of President Bogran Americans and other foreigners have interested themselves in the mineral wealth of Honduras, and several of the mines are now being operated with modern appliances, which give promise of great results. Some of them are producing ore in such quantities as to fully justify their former reputation.



STATUE OF MORAZAN, TEGUCIGALPA.

Under the old system there was no arrangement for getting rid of superfluous water and foul air. Modern pumping and ventilating machinery has been adopted, and the old annoyances that hindered operations or suspended them altogether will be of comparatively little consequence."

"Please tell us something about Tegucigalpa, the capital city," said Frank.

"It received its name," said Mr. Wilson, "from two Indian words signifying 'mountain of silver.' It is about 3000 feet above sea-level, and

BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE NICARAGUA CANAL.